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By Pensioner-Power to Palfries

Jakob Jäger



The cable car traverses a typical Swiss mountain meadow.

Most Swiss have probably never heard of Palfries. It is a tiny summer hamlet high on the alpine meadows below the 2353m Alvier, in Canton St Gallen. Until recently the only normal means of access to this remote location was via a narrow winding road that climbs up from the Rhein valley at Trübbach, just outside Sargans. Even its bus service is sparse - just one return trip a day from May to October that waits at its terminus for 7 hours, as its main clientele are walkers using the network of Alpenweg traversing the high pastures. Now thanks to a group of 60 retirees, many of them engineers, and some 1200 subscribers to a co-operative venture, there is a public cable car service running from May to November making access to this alpine paradise available to all.

The cable car system was built in 1941 at the height of Switzerland's National Emergency (WW2) by the Swiss Army to link the Palfries area of the nation's Alpine Redoubt with the main Sargans to Walenstadt road at a location known

All photos: Copyright Palfries Bahn except where stated
as Ragnatsch. High on the Alvier Massive it was planned to construct underground bunkers to hold reserve troops that would be available to protect the strategically important area surrounding Sargans on the main access corridors along the valleys of the Rhein and Seeztal - that leads from Zürich and central Switzerland. After 1945 the cable car remained in operation in the hands of the Army, was extensively renovated in 1980, and maintained in good order before a change in defence policy saw it become redundant in 1998 when it was mothballed. At this time it was offered for sale to a local association who wished to bring it into service as an amenity to help the development of the tourist potential of the "Sarganserland" area. The transition from military to civilian use became a protracted saga, involving opposition from residents and environmental groups before the St Gallen Administrative Court reached a compromise agreement with a decision in 2013. Another two years elapsed during which various reports on the safety and operational aspects of the project were considered by the IKSS, the Intercantonal Concordat for Ropeways and Ski-lifts. Finally in November 2015 a Cantonal Permit was issued for the operation of the line during summer and autumn up to 2033. Only then could the line be purchased from the Army, agreements signed with the

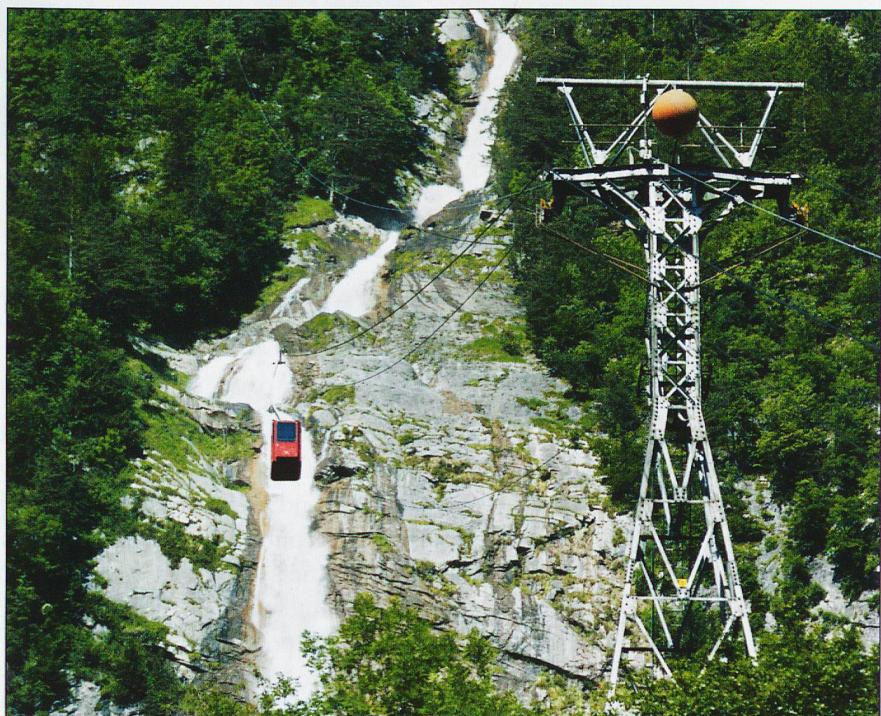
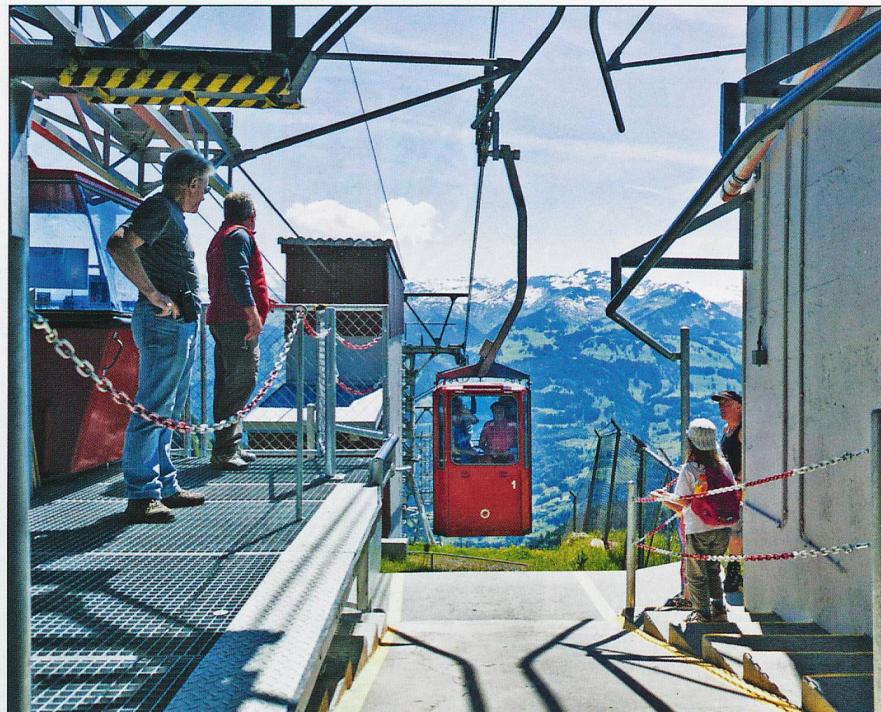


3 ticket versions plus rear of one.
Photo: Michael Farr

'Alpcorporation' who administered the communal high meadows, and contracts for the necessary renovation works let. In the interim the equipment had been kept in full working order and was occasionally operated, as for example in 2011, when a limited operation license was granted for the period March to December. The culmination of all this effort was the opening of the fully renovated cableway on the 28th May 2016, starting a successful summer season that ended in early November.

The 1200 member Co-operative Association who now own and run the cableway has funded the purchase, necessary improvements, and ancillary works (car parking, toilets, operating and reservation systems, etc.) from a mixture of its own funds – it had 18 years to raise money – and grants from the Canton, and the Gemeinde of Mels (site of the 420m high Ragnatsch base station) and Wartau, of which Palfries (at 1728m) is a part. Although some of the Co-op members are retired, this is the case with all of the 60 strong team of volunteers who have taken on the role of the day-to-day operation of this facility, that is now on the National Inventory of Historic Cableways. The 3km. route of the 1247m climb is spectacular as it follows the ravine of the Ratnatscherbach for part of its route, passing over a series of amazing waterfalls then swinging across forest before reaching the alpine pastures. It has two 8 person cabins that operate at 15 minute intervals between 08.30 and 12.00 and 13.00 to 17.00 giving a flow of 32 passengers/hour up and down. The trip takes 11 minutes. The cableway's period of operation is dependent on the upper area being snow free, so it will not recommence operations until Ascension Day, 25th May 2017. The basic return fare is CHF20, although single fares, family tickets, etc. are available. Apart from being operated by a volunteer team of active pensioners the Seilbahn-Palfries has two other unusual claims. Although it is possible to just turn up and travel due to its limited capacity, it is recommended that potential users reserve places either on-line or by telephone. Passengers with reservations will always take precedence over casual travellers. Its other claim to a fame of sorts is that the ticketing system they have chosen to use is based on traditional Edmondson Card tickets, possibly one of the last systems to do so on a daily basis in Switzerland. 

Editor's Note: The author acknowledges the assistance of Alberto Danelli and Michael Farr in researching this article.



TOP: A car approaches the top station.

MIDDLE: You can expect spectacular views of the local waterfalls on your journey.

BOTTOM: A large variety of Edmondson tickets in the rack.